

## Alafat, Beth

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### **CMP's controversial hydropower project passes second regulatory hurdle**

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Central Maine Power Co. received a second key approval from regulators Wednesday for its proposed hydropower project when the Maine Land Use Planning Commission voted 5 to 2 to grant it a land-use certification.

The decision is one in a series of approvals needed from municipal, state and federal governments for the \$1 billion project. Gov. Janet Mills supports the project, which CMP has said will employ 1,600 people at the height of construction and be a boon to the state's economy. But opposition remains strong over potential environmental harm and questions over the project's value to Mainers.

The approval followed last April's ruling by the Maine Public Utilities Commission to grant its permit for the \$1 billion project. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is the next regulator to review the project.

The vote Wednesday approved a draft recommendation by commission staff issued on Dec. 31. Two commissioners, Bill Gilmore and Millard Billings, voted against the measure, while Gwen Hilton recused herself. The commission needs five votes to pass or deny any request.

Voting in favor were commissioners Peter Pray, Durward Humphrey, Everett Worcester, Betsy Fitzgerald and James May.

Despite the approval, some commissioners still had mixed feelings about the CMP project. Commissioner May voted yes, but said if the decision had been based on emotions rather than submitted documents and testimony, he would have voted against it.

And Commissioner Gilmore, who voted no, said the project has kept him awake at night. He said a better route could have been taken for the project.

"Once we've taken this step, we've set a precedent," he said. "Every time we fragment [the North Woods] we run the risk of what the next guy on the steps is going to ask for when he knocks on the door. It makes me nervous."

The ruling confirms that the CMP's project overall complies with the commission's land-use standards, although it requires CMP to remove and in some cases add vegetation, assure emergency vehicles can get into the planned hydropower corridor and get applicable construction permits.

The approval comes after the commission failed last September to form a consensus on the project because it passed too close to Beattie Pond, a protected fishery.

CMP subsequently asked the commission to allow it to re-route the hydropower line from Beattie Pond to Merrill Strip Township, where it would be allowed with a permit. The move will add \$1 million to the project.

CMP's New England Clean Energy Connect, or NECEC, project would supply hydroelectricity from the Canadian border to Massachusetts via a 145-mile corridor, 53 miles of which are through areas in western Maine that would require building the transmission infrastructure.

"This decision recognizes that the NECEC is well designed and sited to meet all LUPC land-use standards, and it is clear that the LUPC commissioners and professional staff have diligently studied the record and project testimony in reaching their decision," said Thorn Dickinson, vice president of business development at Avangrid, the parent company of CMP.

"NECEC is vital to Maine's future both environmentally and economically and we look forward to obtaining other necessary federal, state and municipal approvals and beginning construction on the clean energy corridor later this year," he said.

CMP already has started requesting permits from towns. Dickinson said the project is expected to go into commercial operation in December 2022.

The CMP project continues to draw criticism from opponents, who claim it will interfere with Maine's natural resources and not provide benefits to Mainers.

"There are a lot of really big problems with the project," said Sue Ely, clean energy attorney with the Natural Resources Council of Maine. "I'm hopeful that the DEP will take a good look at it. The decision today ignores the enormous harm that the proposed transmission line would have on the recreational experience, scenic character and natural resources in Maine's western mountains."

When the draft was released, Sandra Howard, director of the grassroots Say NO to NECEC group, said the staff recommendation "devalues the importance of preserving Maine's natural, scenic, and recreational resources of the Kennebec River and National Scenic Appalachian Trail in particular, which are the focus of this permit review."

Howard also is co-leader of an initiative to bring the proposed CMP corridor to a statewide vote on the November 2020 ballot.

Howard and others will have to gather 63,067 signatures, which equals 10 percent of the votes cast for governor in 2018. She would not disclose how many signatures there are to date, but she told the Bangor Daily News recently that signatures still are being collected for submission on the Feb. 3 deadline.

The Land Use Planning Commission oversees the Unorganized Territory, the area of Maine where there are no incorporated municipal governments.

The commission is a nine-member board composed of county and gubernatorial appointees.

Its decision Wednesday certified that the CMP project is permitted in the areas where it is proposed. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection in turn will consider the commission's recommendations within its own decision.

The CMP project still needs a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wetlands permit, an **ISO New England** section 1.3.9 approval and a U.S. Department of Energy presidential permit.

Municipal approvals also are required for construction of project components such as substations and transmission structures. The type and number of permits will vary, depending on location.

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